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WORLD CHRONICLE

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UNIFEM

Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), discusses obstacles to women's full participation in development. Violence against women and sexual harassment are among the major violations of women's human rights which hinder their participation in the development of their societies. Ms. Capeling-Alakija believes that the gap between men and women is still wide in many countries due to cultural practices, and that the improvment of the social and economic status of women is a prerequisite for their advancement. She calls on the World Conference on Human Rights to break the silence and to take strong action to protect women's human rights. Ms. Capeling-Alakija also believes that men historically have "hijacked" religion, using their masculine interpretation to maintain their domination of women.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is WORLD CHRONICLE, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's WORLD CHRONICLE.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

Violence against women, no matter where it occurs, is a major obstacle to women's participation in development. It undermines women's self-esteem, destroys their health, denies their human rights, and prohibits their full involvement in society. When force is used to deprive them of earnings, or when fear of sexual assault prevents them from taking a job or attending a public function, development doesn't occur. What must be done to ensure the full participation of women in the development of their societies?

Since its establishment in 1976 as a voluntary fund, the United Nations Development Fund for Women, or UNIFEM, has worked to promote women's issues. Our guest today, Sharon Capeling-Alakija, is the Director of UNIFEM. A national of Canada, she'll be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Farida Burtis of World News Link Service, Ian Williams of *The New York Observer*, and Pat Orvis of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

Before we talk to Ms. Capeling-Alakija, let's look at the efforts of a group of women to protect themselves from domestic violence. Our correspondent Geraldine Harris reports.

NARRATION:
In common with many big cities, walking the streets of New York at night can be a frightening experience for women. But, the most dangerous place is often behind the closed windows of a private home.

MAN:
Can you talk? Ma'am?
[WOMAN CRIES]

NARRATION:
Wife abuse is the leading cause of injury among young and middle-aged women in the United States, throughout all ethnic and social groups. Domestic violence has also become a major global health problem. In New York, every 15 seconds a

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woman is beaten by her husband or partner. One out of every 10 women here experiences some kind of physical abuse.

[WOMEN IN KARATE CLASS]

In Brooklyn, the Center for Anti-Violence Education teaches women to stand up to attackers. In the self-defence groups, women can share their fears.

STUDENT:
There are a lot of women out there. But they are abused by their husbands, their boyfriends and they can't do nothing about it.

NARRATION:
More than 8,000 women have trained in the Center to empower their bodies and lose their fears. They're taught that age or physical weakness are no barriers to learning self-defence techniques. But self-defence is only a first step to counter violence in the streets and at home.

ANNIE ELLMAN:
Many women do come and they are involved in abusive relationships and do use the support from the class as a way to start thinking about what kind of life changes they may need to make.

NARRATION:
Violence is an entirely preventable disease, if children learn early how to deal with anger. In Brooklyn, anti-violence education is now on the curriculum of some public schools.

TEACHER:
Your father makes you angry?

STUDENT:
Uh-hunh.

TEACHER:
Do you want to say anything about what he does, or no? No, he just makes you angry. Okay? Would you feel better ....

NARRATION:
The first priority is to solve problems with words and better arguments -- and to protect against physical attacks by other children or adults.

STUDENT:
What if they got a gun, and they like this? And you would, you would try to fight the gun?

TEACHER:
No, ask them what they want and make a deal. Okay, and go.

NARRATION:
Karate can teach discipline and respect in the classroom. The school has already noticed a decline in violent behaviour. The World Health Organization devotes this year's World Health Day to the prevention of accidents and violence.

TEACHER:
Nice block! Good. And punch! Good.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sharon Capeling-Alakija, in the introduction we referred to the effect of violence against women on the process of development, with particular relation to developing countries. But surely this is a matter of criminal behaviour and a violation of human rights. Aren't these the things that you should be addressing rather than the aspect of the effect of violence on development?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: The difficulty with actually treating violence against women simply as a human rights issue -- and it is a human rights issue -- or a legal issue, is that very few women have access to the courts, have access to legal assistance, or have access even to knowledge and awareness of what their legal and human rights are, both within the international conventions and within the legal rights at the national level. And so often when we deal with human rights at an international level we are really not affecting what is happening within the home, because there are no states parties acting. This is violence perpetrated against women either on the streets or within the confines of their home, and there still is an enormous reluctance for the state to interfere at that level. And of course that means that women continue to be victims.

LITTLEJOHNS: How does UNIFEM operate? How do you carry out your mandate?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Our entry point into this issue is that we maintain that as a development organization we have to care deeply about human rights, because if women cannot, for example, leave their home for fear of being molested, attacked or hurt, or if they generate income and have that taken away from them when they return

to their home so that they cannot invest it in the ways that they would choose, that in fact real development is not occurring. So we are a development organization, and our entry point into this issue is very much from the fact that we consider violence against women as an obstacle to their full participation in the development process.

LITTLEJOHNS: You are voluntarily funded. Do you have enough money to do what you have set out to do?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: UNIFEM is one of the smallest funds within the United Nations system, and also one of the most recently created funds. And of course, to be created in this particular era, when development dollars are shrinking, has made it very difficult for us to grow. We have grown significantly over the last few years, but for us really to carry out our work as effectively as we would like, we could easily absorb and deliver twice the resources we have at our disposal now.

BURTIS: In India, where you have programmes to assist women who have become victims of sexual assault and violence, is UNIFEM doing anything to address the root causes? For example, the dowry debts, the people who are burned because they don't have enough money for their marriages to produce the dowry. So, in other words, are you trying to assess the root causes? Again, what about other kinds of things? For example, young girls who are sold to rich people from all over the world, ten years old, twelve years old? What is UNIFEM doing about those areas?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: We have, as an organization that basically really grew out of the international women's movement, we -- well, we -- I have a whole range of accountabilities: I'm accountable to the administrator of UNDP and ultimately to the Secretary-General and to several governing bodies of the United Nations system. All of us who work at UNIFEM also feel very accountable to the women's movement, the international women's movement, which really is the root of our organization; and as such we have played over all within the United Nations system as a catalyst for getting a lot of these issues onto the agenda and broadening the agenda of issues such as environment and human rights and other mainstream issues to include more specificity on how these issues impact on the lives of women.

We use our very strong linkages with the international women's movement and with non-governmental organizations; and, in fact, 40 per cent of UNIFEM's projects are executed by NGOs. We use those strong links as a way of bringing their issues into the international arena and attempting to create space in the international arena both for

women and for non-governmental organizations. We also have an advocacy facility within the Fund where we are able to publish and advocate on many of these issues. Most recently we have produced a publication called *Battered Dreams: Violence Against Women as a Development Issue*, which was published by UNIFEM and written by a staff member in UNIFEM from Peru, and which is being widely circulated. We also have some specific model projects in each of the regions around the world which can act as demonstration projects of how in fact mainstream development organizations can incorporate this into their work.

BURTIS: If I might follow up, in the same part of the world, the subcontinent in Pakistan, you have *zena* (fornication) and *hudud* (forbidden) ordinances, which means in legal, civil cases, for example, inheritance, one man's legal testimony in court is equal to that of two women. Now, that changes everything as far as women are concerned. In other words, a woman is equal to half a man, so to speak. How does that affect the work of UNIFEM? You have a Women's Development Bank there, don't you?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: In a country such as Pakistan, the statistics speak for themselves in that it is one of the countries in the world where the gaps between women and men are very large. And, of course, the whole southern Asian region is one of the areas of the world where there are -- in fact, against other global trends -- there are fewer women than men; and it is widely believed by human rights activists and the women's movement in those regions that the reason for those statistics, which are different from any other part of the world, is because of many of the cultural practices that in fact subordinate women and deny them their rights.

This is a very sensitive issue, and of course we are a United Nations organization, and so it's very difficult for us to intervene directly. However, it is most fortunate that within those regions now there are very strong women's organizations headed by women lawyers who are affiliated to women's organizations around the world advocating on behalf of women; and in fact they have played a very important role in getting this issue onto the agenda -- women's rights as human rights -- and the issue of violence against women's rights onto the agenda of the World Conference on Human Rights. I think it's really a tribute to these women around the world that this issue is now going to be discussed within the mainstream of UN human rights discussions.

WILLIAMS: To what extent is there a correlation between the economic dependence of women and the fact that they are trapped in relationships economically

where people can -- where their partners can do these things to them and they can't walk out?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: The correlation between -- ?

WILLIAMS: Between their dependence is -- where the woman is an equal salary earner, does this make violence less likely to occur?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: I think as women's social and economic status -- we have good statistics on this -- as women's social and economic status improves, a whole range of other things begins to improve. In fact, there are global statistics, just for example, that the only variable that UNICEF, the fund for children, the only variable that they have been able to isolate that has a positive effect on mortality rates of children is the education level of women. The Population Fund has statistics now going back over 10 years showing that as women's economic and social status improves, they take control of their fertility, which of course also has a serious impact on the issue of population. And the World Bank has statistics now showing that, in fact, investment, social investment in the education of women, the payback is actually greater than investment in education of boys. We're talking about girls and boys as well as men and women.

So there is a growing and mounting momentum of evidence that shows that it's social and economic status together. Economic status indeed is important, but also social status along with it. I think this false dichotomy between social issues and economic issues really needs to be brought back together, but I do think the economics are important. Money talks.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is World Chronicle. Our guest is Sharon Capeling-Alakija, director of UNIFEM. Ian Williams, you have another question.

WILLIAMS: Yes. I was wondering whether you saw any contradiction in the fact that the UN system is also pushing things like the Year of the Family, which emphasizes the family as a social and economic unit; there is a tendency amongst many of the people who are pushing the concept of the family to adopt a very conservative view of it which would emphasize women's dependence within this unit.

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: I believe that women have very early on regarded the whole question of the Year of the Family with a certain amount of suspicion in terms of what the intentions really were and have mobilized very successfully and effectively to gain the broadest possible definition of family for this Conference, and I think with

considerable success. And certainly the official documentation that is emerging from the United Nations on this issue is giving the widest possible definitions, and I think again that's a tribute to the women's movement.

ORVIS: In New York and other US cities there's a big flap going on right now because pornographic video shops, live sex shows and prostitution are spreading into the upscale neighbourhoods and the suburbs. I'd like to hear your opinion about whose human rights are really at stake here -- the upscale women who are incensed at such garbage on their home turf, or the women who may well have been sold, either literally or effectively, into their roles as prostitutes or as porn stars.

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, you know, I never like to pit women against each other. I think that at all levels of society, there are -- well, first of all, there are many things that divide women -- class, religion, politics, age. There's a variety of issues that divide women. But no issue so unites women, women from all classes and religions and also from the north and south, as the issue of violation and violence of their bodies. So I think indeed it may well be that in upper class neighbourhoods women who are now being exposed to this are offended, but they have a right to be offended. But equally, of course, the women who are exploited against their will, and perhaps out of economic desperation, to participate in pornography are a whole other area of human rights abuse. So I think that when women speak out against pornography, whether they're offended by looking at it or offended by the fact that women are exploited through it, that it is equally valid.

BURTIS: The Secretary-General has said that he's going to bring about a revolution in terms of hiring women in that by the 50th anniversary it'll be fifty-fifty in high-up policy level positions. Do you see the momentum so far? Do you think this goal is going to be realized?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, first of all, just to give a short answer, I'm not overwhelmed by the momentum, no; but to be fair to the Secretary-General, he actually -- there are a lot of qualifiers in his statement when you examine it. It was a statement that he made to the Fifth Committee, which is the Budget and Finance Committee, and I think there are words somewhat to the extent of "in so far as possible", and so on. But he has used fifty-fifty as, I think, a catchy expression, because, of course, fifty-fifty, in English at least, means equality, and it is the 50th anniversary of the United Nations; and so I think it's a good term for people to rally around.

However, there is enormous resistance, and there are -- given also the economic straits with which most organizations within the United Nations system find themselves -- there are also a lot of constraints with respect to bringing women from outside, because it is absolutely mathematically impossible to reach a fifty-fifty target from the women who are within the system. So given the constraints and the freeze on hiring for most UN organizations, it's doubtful that this target can be achieved. But I think it's worth having targets to measure progress against, and certainly UNIFEM will be monitoring and raising the issue. In fact, we're going to produce fifty-fifty buttons just to keep on reminding people.

WILLIAMS: While we're considering the UN system itself, of course there's a lot of evidence to suggest that women escape from the home and go into workplaces where they're equally susceptible to harassment by males in a sort of higher professional relationship with them. Do you think, as the UN is an employer with 20,000 - 30,000 women, and to some extent because of its peculiar extraterritorial character, these women don't have the legal protection that they would if they were based in the continental United States? For example, if they were employed by a private firm here. Do you think that the protections and safeguards in the UN system against the various allegations of sexual harassment are sufficient?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: I think that this is something that the United Nations has at last chosen to come to terms with. And I think it's struggling with it because of the nature of the institution, which embraces many cultures and traditions and attitudes and so on, and because, of course, it also has this extraterritorial status. One example, for instance, that I find perhaps really one of the most offensive forms of abuse of women's rights is, of course, in the case of spouses, women spouses of UN employees who are divorced just prior to retirement, and because of the extraterritorial situation the United Nations is in, these women have no rights with respect to pension. If the man remarries, then these women, who may have followed their husbands all over the world, often at the expense of their own careers, have no recourse. And to me, for a woman suddenly to find herself 59, 60, and so on, having followed her husband and having no option for a career and having no access to pension, is perhaps one of the more flagrant and difficult issues. And it's very difficult for the UN itself to tackle, but that's one example that I think as an organization with ethics we have to address.

LITTLEJOHNS: Sharon, that's a terrible situation. Why do you say it's difficult for the UN to tackle?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Because there's no legal recourse, there's no legal recourse for the --

LITTLEJOHNS: But the UN has its own legal system in effect, doesn't it? I mean, rules that apply to pensions, for example. I mean, surely they can be changed to the benefit of women in this terrible predicament that you've just mentioned.

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, I think there are now petitions being brought forward as a result of that. But this has gone on over a number of years. And I think now it's being brought to the attention of the authorities, and I hope action will be taken.

ORVIS: It's coming up on two decades since the International Year of Women, if I remember correctly, and almost a decade since the Decade of Women, and we still hear about women being burned alive for their dowries; we hear about women in Africa dying during childbirth from complications caused by such practices as that euphemistically called "female circumcision"; we hear that there are increasing numbers of gangs in Southeast Asia kidnapping women and selling them across borders into prostitution. On balance, are things getting better or getting worse for women?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: I think, in absolute numbers, things are getting worse. I think, in terms of percentages, things are getting marginally better in some parts of the world, mostly in industrialized countries, and in a few countries in Latin America there has been some marginal improvement in percentages. But I'm afraid that the systemic abuse of women's rights and of their bodies is still something that there is a silence around and a reluctance for international institutions to address. And I think it's very important in this year of the World Conference on Human Rights that we break the silence around these issues. And thankfully we have more women in the media who are willing to raise these issues as well.

BURTIS: In 1987 there was a proposal by the UN Committee on Elimination of Discrimination against Women about *al-ijtihad*, or in Islamic countries adopting laws to make them more progressive in terms of marriage, civil laws, custody, property rights, and so forth. Do you see any kind of momentum towards that? I mean, it could be, in terms of men's issues, for example, banking, there has been adaptation, but in terms of women's issues, there doesn't seem to be any.

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Yes, you're absolutely correct. It seems when it comes to the issue of women most religions have been hijacked by men -- at least the interpretation of religion. And there are organizations -- for example, there is an organization called Women Under Islamic Law, who are trying to recapture their own religion because they believe very much in their faith and feel when studying original texts that there is plenty of space for the improvement of rights of women within the religion, but that the interpretation of religion by men has isolated and singled out women for subordination, and [that men] fall back on religion as a way of maintaining the subordination of women. So I think there is some momentum building up in that regard.

WILLIAMS: The reforms of the UN system at the moment look very much like someone shoved a swizzle stick in there and mix the bits up and see what falls together. I understand one of the proposals is the amalgamation of your unit, UNIFEM, with INSTRAW inside the Secretariat itself.

LITTLEJOHNS: INSTRAW, what's that?

WILLIAMS: It's another women's institute, it's a sort of more --

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: It's the International Institute for Training and Research, which is also one -- it was created I think in about 1980, around the time of the Copenhagen Conference, to --

LITTLEJOHNS: So does this represent an erosion of UNIFEM's mandate?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: It would not represent an erosion of UNIFEM's mandate. My understanding is that the proposal would be to merge the mandates of INSTRAW and UNIFEM under one organization. The Secretary-General has now established a task force to study this, and Dr. Nafis Sadik, who is the Undersecretary General in charge of the Population Fund, will be charing that task force, and there will be representation from both organizations, and it will be meeting next month. So I can't pre-empt what will happen, or unnecessarily predict, but definitely, you're correct, there is a proposal on the table.

LITTLEJOHNS: Does UNIFEM endeavour to establish the background, the reason for this epidemic of violence against women? I mean, it's evidently some psychological thing, isn't it?

CAPELING-ALAKIJA: Well, I think it does relate back to the whole question of subordination of women, and the basic reinforcement of that in cultural practices over centuries. And so there really has to be a transformation around universality of women's rights and women's rights as human rights and the equality of men and women as enshrined in a whole range of international treaties and agreements now, which most countries of the world have signed onto.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Capeling-Alakija, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Sharon Capeling-Alakija, Director of UNIFEM. She was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Farida Burtis of World News Link Service, Ian Williams of *The New York Observer*, and Pat Orvis of the *Christian Science Monitor*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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